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ABSTRACT

The study examines the employment status and living conditions over a 3-year period of all special education students from 13 school districts who graduated or aged out of these programs in 1984, 1985, and 1986. Data were gathered through a review of school records and telephone interviews with parents. Preliminary results concerning the employment rate 6 months after graduation found ranges from 71% employed for nonhandicapped students to 38% employed for severely handicapped students. From 6 months to 30 months after employment rates increased for the mildly mentally retarded (38% to 52%) and decreased for the behavior disordered (52% to 22%). Although 23% of the nonhandicapped and learning disabled students earned the minimum wage or better at 6 months; the sensory impaired, mildly mentally retarded, and severely handicapped showed a rate of less than 10% earning minimum wage at 6 months. Sensory impaired students had the highest rate of enrollment in postsecondary programs (58%) with other handicapped populations attending at a rate of 30% or less. The percentage of behavior disordered students neither working nor attending postsecondary education program increased from 10 to 82% between 6 and 30 months. Percentages of handicapped students living in independent settings after 6 months ranged from 4% (severely mentally retarded to 18% (learning disabled). (DB)

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A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF GRADUATES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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The postschool adjustment of special education students has commanded interest as the issue of transition from school to adult life has come into focus. Although follow-up studies have been done in special education since the early 1900s, the recent emphasis on transition has resulted in a number of major efforts to track special education graduates into their adult lives. The combined results of these studies provide a general overview of the current situation. About 60% of the graduates who were enrolled in special education programs obtained employment within the first year of leaving school (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi, & Fanning, 1985). However, the percentage varies widely by type of disability and gender; persons with learning disabilities are more successful than severely handicapped persons, and males are more successful than females (Edgar, 1986). All jobs tend to be low status and low paying, and most of the jobs are obtained through a family or friend network. Few special

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education graduates are successful in completing postsecondary education programs (i.e., community college), and most graduates tend to live with their families.

Our efforts to document the outcomes of special education began in 1981, when we initiated a 15-district, single-interview follow-up study of special education graduates. The graduation lists of special education students between 1977 and 1983 were obtained, and telephone interviews were conducted with 956 parents of former special education students (Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, the employment rate varied from 38% for the severely handicapped students to 68% for LD/BD students. In comparison, few former students were enrolled in postsecondary education programs, and almost 50% of the severely handicapped and mildly retarded graduates were unengaged (not working and not attending postsecondary education programs). Most of the graduates were still living with their families or relatives.

These data represent one static data point, but this data point is variable for the individual subjects; some had been out of school for five years, others for only six months. We also did not have data from a control group of nonhandicapped students with which to compare these data.

This research led us to develop our current study, which involves the collection of data on former students at standard time intervals and the addition of a contrast group of

Table

Results of Five-Year Follow-Up Study

Category	N	Employed		Postsecondary Education		Unengaged		Living Independently	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	956*	569	60	135	14	275	29	232	24
Mod/Severe MR	144	54	38	12	8	71	49	9	7
Mild MR	115	51	45	11	6	55	48	22	19
LD/BD	610	416	68	90	15	130	21	357	59

* In addition to the three disability groups, the total includes students with sensory impairments, neurological disabilities, and health impairments.

nonhandicapped students who graduated from the same public schools at the same time as the special education students. We are also tracking these students during a period of three years in order to ascertain changes over time. This design enables us to evaluate outcomes by disability type, over time, and to compare the results with those of a nonhandicapped cohort. The following data are provided as an interim report of this study.

Method

Sample

The sample includes all special education students from 13 school districts who graduated or aged out of these programs in 1984, 1985, and 1986. In addition, 30 nonhandicapped students not enrolled in a precollege course were also included from each district for each of the target years. Table 2 presents the numbers of students involved in this study.

Instrumentation

Record review. School records were examined to determine birth date, ethnicity, gender, and handicapping condition at exit from the public schools.

Telephone questionnaire. A telephone interview was conducted with a parent (usually the mother) of each student.

Table 2

Students in Follow-up Study by Disability Group

	SEV MR	MOD MR	MILD MR	SENS IMP	NEURO HEALTH	BD	LD	HC	NON HC
1984									
No. Possible*	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	551	135
No. Contacted	21	16	42	23	9	13	159	283(58%)	87(64%)
1985									
No. Possible	58	51	82	36	13	31	407	678	262
No. Contacted	27(47%)	23(45%)	43(52%)	16(44%)	7(54%)	19(61%)	202(50%)	337(50%)	168(64%)
1986									
No. Possible	61	54	108	23	16	33	435	729	341
No. Contacted	45(74%)	27(50%)	63(58%)	18(78%)	12(75%)	20(61%)	262(60%)	447(61%)	267(78%)
Total									
No. Possible								1958	730
No. Contacted	93	66	148	57	28	52	623	1067(55%)	522(71%)

* This information is not available for the 1984 graduates.

The interview followed a scripted survey which took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Procedures. The director of special education in each district compiled a list of all graduates and age-outs from special education in June of each graduating year. A letter from the school district explaining the study was mailed to each parent. Those who did not wish to participate in the study were asked to inform the district or simply tell the telephone caller that they did not want to participate (5% of the parents declined to participate). In November of the subsequent year (six months after graduation), telephone calls were made to all the parents. The telephone callers were recruited through the local districts and trained by our staff. The callers were instructed to attempt each telephone call at least three times (once during the day, once in the evening, and once on a weekend) before giving up trying to contact the family. For disconnected telephones or wrong numbers an attempt was made to locate the correct number through local directory assistance. The districts provided the record review information on each student. All data were coded by project staff and entered into a computer for analysis.

Following the initial telephone contact, subsequent telephone calls were made at six-month intervals for only those students whose parents were contacted at the previous round of interviews. A revised questionnaire elicited data

that reflected changes in status from the time of the previous interview. Detailed information on these procedures is described in Levine, Dubey, Levine, and Edgar (1986).

Results

An initial chi square analysis was performed on the data collected at the first six-month contact with the three cohorts (1984, 1985, and 1986) by disability type; no significant differences were noted. Therefore, all round one (six-month) data were collapsed across cohorts.

The following data were collected six months after graduation from the public schools and at six-month intervals until 30 months after graduation.

Employment Rate

At six months after graduation, the employment rates were as follows: severely mentally retarded, 35%; mildly mentally retarded, 39%; sensory impaired, 37%; behavior disordered, 52%; learning disabled, 63%; and nonhandicapped, 75%. These figures range from 71% for the nonhandicapped students to 38% for the severely handicapped students. From six months to 30 months after graduation, the employment rates are relatively stable except for increases for the mildly mentally retarded (38% to 52%) and decreases for the behavior disordered students (52% to 22%).

Wages Earned

Both the nonhandicapped and learning disabled students were earning the minimum wage or better ($134 a week) at a rate of 23% at six months. The sensory impaired, mildly mentally retarded, and severely handicapped showed a rate of less than 10% earning minimum wage at six months. Although the sensory impaired students showed a low rate of income, 60% of these students were attending postsecondary education programs. Both the nonhandicapped cohort and the learning disabled cohort increased to 28% by 30 months. Behavior disordered students decreased from 20% to 0% by 30 months. The other groups remained stable.

Postsecondary Education

The data for students enrolled in community colleges, four-year colleges, and vocational technical institutes at six months are as follows: severely mentally retarded, 30%; mildly mentally retarded, 28%; sensory impaired, 58%; behavior disordered, 23%; learning disabled, 29%; and nonhandicapped, 46%. Sensory impaired students were enrolled in postsecondary education programs at a rate of 58% which is higher than the nonhandicapped population (48%). The percentage of postsecondary school attendance decreased for all groups over 30 months.

Unengaged

The percentage of students who were neither working, attending postsecondary education programs, nor engaged in any type of formal activity at six months after graduation is as follows: severely mentally retarded, 42%; mildly mentally retarded, 44%; sensory impaired, 21%; behavior disordered, 35%; learning disabled, 23%; and nonhandicapped, 8%. By 30 months, the unengaged rate for the behavior disordered group increased from 10% to 82%, while the nonhandicapped group, sensory impaired cohort, and learning disabled group were unengaged at a rate of approximately 20%.

Living Independently

The percentages of students living in independent settings (alone, with a spouse or partner, with friends, in military barracks, a dormitory, or on the street) at six months after graduation are as follows: severely mentally retarded, 4%; mildly mentally retarded, 6%; sensory impaired, 33%; behavior disordered, 31%; learning disabled, 18%; and nonhandicapped, 33%. The sensory impaired students, behavior disordered students, and nonhandicapped students were independent at a rate of 31% - 33%. By 30 months, the nonhandicapped and sensory impaired students were living independently at a rate of 55%. The rate of independent living for the learning disabled group increased steadily from 18% to 40% over the 30-month period.

Discussion

The most obvious question is: Have outcomes improved for special education graduates since professionals in the field have begun to attend to issues of transition? A comparison of our more recent graduates to those graduated before 1983 sheds some light on the answer. The employment rates of the two studies are somewhat equivalent. However, the data are fairly convincing in showing that employment rates increase with time after graduation. The more recent graduates have a higher rate of attending postsecondary education programs than the earlier students. However, because the rate of attendance tends to decrease with time, the earlier data may reflect the results of combining data from students who have been out of high school for varied amounts of time. Because the earlier data vary widely in terms of length of time from graduation, it is difficult to determine if outcomes are improving. One can only recommend that follow-up of students be continued with careful control for time elapsed since graduation.

Employment

There is no doubt that employment is an important factor in the quality of life of former special education students. The current emphasis in special education on employment programs is well warranted. Education clearly must attend to jobs and earning power. Even if they are employed, adults who

earn less than the minimum wage per week cannot be a viable part of our society. Even if we achieve a 70% employment rate, if these individuals earn less than minimum wage, they have no chance to escape poverty. Our society in general shares this problem, as some 30 million Americans live below the poverty level (Economic Justice for All, 1986). There is the definite discrete possibility that former special education students are destined to live below the poverty level. Our efforts to teach students skills that enable them to gain reasonable employment must continue. We may also find that skill acquisition is not enough, that we will have to make efforts to locate jobs that pay reasonable salaries and perhaps advocate for ongoing entitlement programs to supplement the earnings of these individuals.

Postsecondary Opportunities

The traditional path to a career and employment in the United States begins with the acquisition of job skills in postsecondary education programs. American public schools have never assumed the role of job preparation. Even though our current emphasis is to focus on job training in high school for special education students, we believe we should not neglect advocating the development of appropriate postsecondary education programs for these students. With the exception of the sensory-impaired students, we believe there are few data to support optimism about the effectiveness of

postsecondary school programs for handicapped students. Of all the current job training efforts, we believe the most fruitful can be in creating meaningful community college and vocational technical programs for our students. There are some data to indicate that in the United States good job opportunities are not available for our youth until they reach the age of 22 or 23 (Hamilton, 1986). Given this assumption, the development of vocational or apprentice programs for postsecondary school youth should become a priority.

Unengaged Youth

The data in our studies only confirm what is generally known, that many of our youth are unemployed and not enrolled in educational programs. Our data on behavior disordered youth and mildly retarded youth are especially discouraging. Just what do young people do all day long if they are not working or going to school? Not good things, we would think. The cost to society in general and the discouragement to individuals are substantial when so many of our youth are unengaged. How long can our society tolerate this great waste of human potential? Little wonder that so many of our youth (over 50% in our study) are still dependent on their families for basic support three years after leaving high school. The anecdotal information we have from talking to some 2,000 families is very vivid; for the majority of these families, life remains a constant struggle, the American dream merely an illusion.

Future Directions

We sincerely believe that there are solutions to these problems. We are committed to finding answers to the problem of how best to prepare handicapped students for their lives in the adult world. We would like to make five recommendations for all professionals in the field of special education:

1. To continue the commitment to upgrade secondary special education programs for handicapped youth that will produce skills that are practical and valued by the adult world.
2. To advocate for postschool programs that will offer continued education opportunities for handicapped students who graduate from high school.
3. To consider the needs of special education students and their families in light of the broader societal issues of poverty and the underclass in our society. Poverty is increasing in our society whose economic structure needs to be re-evaluated.
4. The issues of quality of life are not confined to jobs. Basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care must be guaranteed regardless of employment status. Self-esteem, friendships, and hope for the future are complex issues that require broad strategies. We must expand our intervention techniques to include lifelong ongoing support systems in addition to "fix the individual" treatments.

5. As a profession, special educators should consider advocating for entitlement programs for all members of our society who currently are unable to achieve minimal standards of living.

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